A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter 36

"Put Murshida in his pressure chamber," Esera told the droids who were piling out of the transport shuttle. "Take Xiss and Lieutenant Voyan to the medbay, get Voyan on some painkillers and send him to the bridge. Put the ingots in the ship's safe and the bodies in the medbay's morgue."

Alarms blared throughout *Encounter*, to alert the nearly-empty ship's crew that battle was imminent. Repair drones scurried to their damage control stations, and the returning droid marine compliment rushed to safeguard all the key areas of the ship. On a Republic star destroyer, there would have been voices on the loudspeaker and voices in the halls, but there was nothing on *Encounter* save the alarms. And that was terribly confusing to the one civilian aboard.

"Esera!" Alize called, emerging from the galley. "What is going on out here?"

"That enemy cruiser wants a piece of us," Esera said.

The Zygerrian was horrified. "We're going into battle?!"

"This is a warship, Alize, this was inevitable. But *Encounter*'s survived far worse than one star destroyer." Esera wished she was as confident as she sounded. *Encounter*'s only battle involved baiting a battlecruiser into getting caught in the region of warped space-time just outside a singularity's event horizon. There would be no such tricks to fall back on in orbit of Zeltros.

On the bridge, Esera was soon joined by a patched-up Voyan, who was definitely on a dose of heavy painkillers. He wobbled into his seat at the chief engineer's station. "Will you be able to function, lieutenant?" asked Esera.

"I feel just fine," Voyan said. "But I'd rather be sitting than standing. Things get... spinny."

"Do your job right and we'll get through this, just like last time."

Esera found herself wishing *Encounter* had a fighter compliment. Her destroyer's point defense weapons were good, designed to fend off pirates in the Outer Rim, but she would have felt better with fighters of her own. Even Vulture droids would have been something. On the sensor screen, she watched the swarm of NTB-630 bombers and their V-wing escorts approaching. Her musings were quickly interrupted, though, as the life-size hologram of General Grievous appeared before her.

"Komara!" he barked, arms folded behind his back, his eyes glaring from behind that mask. "I haven't heard from you in days, and now the media is saying we've invaded Zeltros! What's going on there?"

"I invaded Zeltros," said Esera. *With a single shuttle's worth of droids, and promptly withdrew.*

"I approve of your initiative," Grievous said, his stance easing up. "But that seems very out of character for you."

"The Zeltrons reaffirmed their loyalty to the Republic, and when one of their citizens kidnapped my lieutenant, they refused to lift a finger. I took matters into my own hands," said Esera. "No one crosses you, Grievous. Why should they cross me?"

If he'd had a mouth, Grievous would have smiled, Esera was sure of it. "You are learning well, Komara. What is your current situation?"

"I am being pursued by a Republic cruiser," she said. "We are outgunned and outnumbered and battle is imminent."

"Typical. Survive for two hours," Grievous told her, his ear-antennae wiggling and tilting, the sign he was sending out orders directly to the droid network. "Help is on the way."

The transmission cut out without further formalities.

"I wonder who he's sending..." Voyan muttered.

Esera turned her attention to the tactical readout. *Vigilance* was six thousand kilometers behind them, well within turbolaser range. Radiation and heat flared behind the ship, it was accelerating. Esera knew from her time aboard those ships that *Vigilance* would be able to accelerate at a maximum speed of three thousand G's. *Encounter* would make two thousand and eight hundred G's. They'd be able to run her destroyer down. However, *Encounter* was barely half *Vigilance*'s mass. While noticeably slower in a straight line, *Encounter* was nimbler, and quicker to overcome inertia.

But how do I put that to use in the orbit of a planet? Esera wondered.

"*All hands, man your battle stations, all hands, man your battle stations, set condition one throughout the ship,*" a voice droned, muffled and distant.

Asajj felt like she was floating. When she opened her eyes, and saw a watery film over everything, she realized she actually was floating- in a bacta tank. Every breath she took through the respirator pained her, but not as much as it had before. A face peered at her from outside, mischievous blue eyes and a smug smirk behind a red-brown beard.

"Hello there," said Obi-wan Kenobi.

"No, no, no," groaned Asajj, closing her eyes. "This is a bad dream, you're not real."

"I'm afraid I am," Kenobi said. "You took an incredible punishment down there. You shouldn't even be awake right now."

"I got stupid, I messed up, I had it coming," said Asajj.

"Oh?"

Perhaps it was the medicine being pumped through her blood, but Asajj found herself answering honestly before she could tell the Jedi to scram. "I should have learned my lesson years ago, but I keep touching the dark side. And every time, things go wrong."

"Yes, that's a very important lesson to learn," agreed Kenobi. "The dark side always makes you pay a price in the end. You should know that better than most."

"I should," Asajj said. "Let me rest, Kenobi. I feel like a freight train ran over me."

"One wonders where Komara finds these characters," said Kenobi, moving over to a console beside the bacta tank. "Sleep tight, Ventress." He tapped a button, no doubt a sedative, because before Asajj could count to ten, the world began to fade into darkness again.

"*All hands, man your battle stations, all hands, man your battle stations...*" was the last thing she heard before all became silent.

"It feels really weird just sitting down here in the medbay," Ahsoka said, tapping her heels against the empty bed she sat on.

"They might need that soon," said Obi-wan.

"But not right now."

"Yes, though, it is unusual. After three years, I feel like I should be rushing to the bridge when I hear that alarm," Obi-wan said. Ahsoka nodded.

"And I feel like I need to be getting to my fighter."

The distant alarms blared, muted through the bulkheads of the medbay. *Shouldn't this be something to feel good about?* Obi-wan thought. *For once, I'm not involved in the fighting. Isn't this what we want?* Right now, though, Obi-wan could only feel useless. And those feelings weren't his alone.

"You two," the chief medical officer, a stern Human woman, said to them, pointing their way. "Either scram or come with me, we're going to have casualties soon."

"It's just one ship," said Ahsoka. "What could it do?"

"*Just one ship?*" echoed the medical officer. She scrunched up her face. "Everyone's saying there's a traitor Dark Jedi on that Separatist destroyer. Do you know how much chaos you normal Jedi have caused with *just one ship?* What do you think a Dark Jedi is going to do? We're going to have casualties, mark my words."

"She's got a point, Ahsoka," Obi-wan said. "What can we do to help here?"

A thousand kilometers above Zeltros, *Encounter*'s engines began to blaze bright, the destroyer becoming a new star streaking across the sky. Behind it followed *Vigilance,* burning even more vividly, though not yet moving as quickly.

"Captain, at our present acceleration we will momentarily achieve escape velocity," the command battle droid reported. "Shall we plot a course into the outer system?"

"No," said Esera. "Keep us circling around the planet. As long as we're up here, they won't dare land troops. They'll have to deal with us before doing anything else in this system."

"Our drive plume is over a kilometer long now," Voyan said from the engineer's station. "I can't imagine what this looks like to everyone down there."

"Will the radiation interfere with the star destroyer's sensors?" asked Esera.

"Doubtful," said Voyan.

"The Republic cruiser will be able to target the radiation signature even if it obscures the ship, Captain," said the droid. "In fact, we have made ourselves an even bigger target."

"And then there's the bombers and fighters catching up with us," Voyan added. "They're avoiding our plume but it's not going to delay them long." He peered up at a screen above him. "Our deflector shields have also destroyed a few satellites."

"No one's on them, right?"

"No, Captain."

"Stay the course, then. Machines can be replaced, people can't."

The command droid titled his head at her. "I hope I don't get replaced," he said.

"No, commander, there's no need," Esera sighed. She craned her neck to look at the designation stamped on the droid's back: OOM-451, an older model. *If he's served this long, he'll probably keep serving.* "Just do your job."

"Roger, roger."

Moments later, a pilot droid at another station spoke: "The Republic fighters and bombers are now moving at quintuple our velocity, thirty-two seconds until contact."

"You know, we outrun those things in a straight line," said Voyan.

"That's great, but we're not moving in a straight line," Esera told him. She turned to the droids. "Take the primary armament offline. I want all power to the shields and defense grid."

"Roger, roger," the droids answered.

That's never not going to be weird, Esera thought. Her eyes locked on the sensor screen, as the Republic attackers began to close in. "They've launched proton torpedoes," said a droid. They arced across the screen, towards *Encounter*, just seconds away from impact. They'd blow a hole in the shields and that'd be the end of this ship built without armor. *What do I do?* she wondered, as she opened herself to the Force.

Voyan's voice echoed in her mind. *The drive plume is a kilometer long.* Like a lightsaber, the size of a starship. Space battles were new territory for Esera, but lightsabers were not.

"Pilot, I'm taking the helm," she said to a droid.

"Roger, roger," the pilot droid answered, stepping aside from the helm console. Esera switched the ship to manual input, and waited for the right moment. *Now!* She dipped *Encounter*'s prow towards the planet, as the port bow maneuvering thrusters fired, swerving the ship.

Zeltros, nothing more than a dark mass with a blue haze of atmosphere, suddenly filled bridge windows. *Encounter* groaned as the tensor fields surged with power. A huge swathe of proton torpedoes vanished from the sensors, as *Encounter*'s engines spewed an arc of incandescent plasma across them.

"Did you just vaporize those things with the drive plume?" asked Voyan, astounded.

"Yes," said Esera, returning the helm to the droid.

"They were seven hundred meters from us!"

"Yes."

"Do you have any idea of just how perfectly that had to be timed? If you'd been off by so much as a blink of an eye, that wouldn't have worked! A computer couldn't even have done that as-"

"Lieutenant," Esera said, keeping her voice low but hard, "a computer's abilities are insignificant compared to the power of the Force. I felt an opportunity, and I took it, at exactly the moment I needed to."

"Jedi," muttered Voyan, shaking his head. "It's like the universe bends to your will."

While Esera would have liked to reflect on her impeccable timing and the performance of a feat she never would have even considered possible months ago, there was a battle at hand.

Encounter shuddered as the torpedoes impacted on the shields, but no longer numerous enough to pierce them. *A second long-range attack won't work,* Esera thought. She knew clone pilots, she knew their tactics. They would not be daunted by her unexpected use of the drive plume, they would come in close for the kill. "What's the status of our point defense batteries?" she asked to the bridge droids.

"One hundred percent functional, Captain," said one.

"Voyan, our capacitors are doing better than they were at the black hole, right?"

"I replaced all of them, Captain," said Voyan.

"Hold fire until they're within ten kilometers," Esera said. "Pilot, continue our course into a lower orbit."

"Roger, roger." the droids answered. Within seconds, nearly half of the ship's sixty point-defense turrets opened up, streaks of red light spraying into space, like luminescent tendrils growing out of the hull.

"Captain, I have a suggestion," Commander OOM-451 said.

That a battle droid could come up with anything on its own left Esera raising an eyebrow. "Yes?" she asked.

"This destroyer is equipped with an extremely high-power sensor suite. You seem to have overlooked this in your tactical analysis."

"I'm a bit new to all this, commander," said Esera. "If you've got something to say, say it."

"In our time fighting pirates, we would direct the full power of our sensors at them. The energy output would often blind or even destroy their own sensor systems, making them unaware they were being targeted."

"The droid's got a point, Captain," Voyan said. "We did that too, back in the Trade Federation days. These clone fighters aren't rickety pirate skiffs, but we've always had better electronics than the Republic."

"So, like some kind of active jamming?"

"Yes, Captain," the droid answered.

"Make it so." Esera waved her hand, and the droids got to work. But nothing seemed to happen. She studied the sensor read-out, watching the Republic fighter and bomber markers continue on as if nothing had happened.

"Wait for it," Voyan said, voice so quiet that he might have been talking to himself. One of the markers blinked out, and then another. Only a trickle at first, but as a minute ticked by, the Republic formation began to dwindle rapidly, even as they assaulted the shields with torpedoes and heavy laser cannons. Esera understood what was happening. The loss of one ship let one more gun turret focus on a target another turret already had. If that target went down, that was at least two turrets freed up to focus on a third target being attacked by a third turret. Like a ball of snow rolling downhill, the effect was unstoppable, and the clones knew it. The remaining bombers and fighters broke off and blasted away from *Encounter.*

"We did it," Esera said, letting her breath out and leaning back in the captain's seat.

"Damage is negligible, but the shields have been reduced by twenty-one percent," announced a pilot droid.

"And that star destroyer is worth six of us, in shields and firepower," said Voyan. "We're not out of it yet."

"Lieutenant, why haven't you Separatists used this sensor trick before?" asked Esera. "I never encountered it in three years of battle."

"The same reason our repair drones were programmed to let the ship fall apart," Voyan said. The droid commander nodded.

"This tactic has been marked as restricted in the local droid network, in order to preserve corporate intellectual property," OOM-451 said. "Additionally, the more we use this tactic, the more the Republic can study it, and adapt its defensive techniques."

"Unbelievable," sighed Esera, though she completely believed what the droid said. "So, now the Republic knows we can overpower their sensors. That trick won't work again when they come back."

"They're coming back?" asked Voyan, astounded. "After that pounding we gave them?"

"Of course they will," said Esera. There was a dark feeling in her heart, as the horror of the clone army hit home like it never had before. "They'll keep coming as long as the orders stand. Death by our guns doesn't scare them. They're clones. They were born to die."

In front of them, the sun came around the horizon of Zeltros, bathing the bridge in bright golden light. Behind, *Vigilance* drew closer, and in minutes, the first blue lasers were shooting past *Encounter*. The real battle had begun.

It was midday when Tarkin got word that the situation at Zeltros had gone bad. *Of course it went bad,* thought Tarkin, smirking at the report on his desk. *It was designed to go bad!* Compared to battles in the past months, the skirmish above that planet was nothing. Insignificant, irrelevant. But the last few weeks had been very quiet, as the damnable cyborg plotted his next move and the Republic licked its wounds. A destroyer and a cruiser battling it out at Zeltros was a story that had made its way up to the main media networks.

"...for those of you just joining us, this *is* a live feed from satellites above Zeltros," an HNN announcer was saying as a flat hologram showed a Republic cruiser chasing a Separatist destroyer, blasting away at its shields. "The Separatists are clearly outmatched and making a run for it."

No, they aren't, thought Tarkin, rolling his eyes at the ignorant news anchor. The destroyer was obviously buying time. If it wanted to flee, it could have easily. Instead, it was slowly descending into a lower and lower orbit. The implication was as clear as day to anyone who'd studied any amount of space combat tactics and knew their atmospheric physics. The Separatists had a ship with a smaller frontal cross-section, the Republic one was much larger. A planet's atmosphere only very gradually gave way to vacuum, and at their altitudes, there was a relatively significant amount of atmospheric gasses to be found. Therefore, the Separatist ship was victim to less atmospheric drag, and every particle counted at the speeds they were traveling. The lower they got, the more of a maneuvering advantage the enemy would have. That Commander Cody was falling right into the rebel ploy was disappointing, but he was a clone who did things by the book. *I suppose predictably isn't the worst thing to have in a subordinate,* thought Tarkin. *You can always count on a clone to follow orders.*

More than orders, actually; Cody was also following Republic doctrine. Long-range harassment by fighters and bombers was standard operating procedure, and when that failed, the star destroyer closed to point-blank range where its thick armor would make up for its lack of super-heavy weaponry. While doctrine was something that some commanders felt constrained by, there was a good reason for it to exist. Any commander who broke with doctrine was risking his head; if he won, he might reap the benefits, but if he broke doctrine and lost... more than a few generals and admirals in history had met grisly ends, that way. Cody would not be one of those men.

Obviously, the fighters and bombers *had* failed against this lone Separatist warship. *How* was a question Tarkin was mildly interested in. The rebels weren't known to come out ahead in such confrontations. Grainy video from early on in the fight showed the rebel destroyer making a sudden and dramatic high-speed course correction, before its point-defenses had torn apart the Republic ships with suspicious ease. *Alien traitors?* Tarkin wondered. *Or a new weapon?*

Whatever it was, it'd have to wait. A part of the Supreme Chancellor's duties were to attend intelligence briefings, and that was just what Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence, Director-General Isard of the Senate Bureau of Intelligence, a host of officers from the military proper, as well as leading politicians of the Senate Intelligence Oversight Committee and the Jedi, had to give him today. In an austere bunker deep beneath the Senate chambers, Tarkin chaired the meeting. With a nod, he gave Orlok leave to begin.

"Generals, admirals, Jedi masters, members of the Senate, Chancellor," began Orlok, "the Separatists are massing their forces in the Galactic north. While our spy rings have been greatly degraded in the last months, we have assessed what Grievous's next move will be." He brought up a hologram of the galaxy, and it zoomed in on the Galactic north, where Loyalist armies and fleets were stretched too thin to advance but the Separatists were too few in number to advance.

"Anyone could have predicted he'd link the northern pockets," Isard said. Orlok gave him a sharp look.

"Would you care to inform us of the precise location and vector of his attack, Director-General?" asked Orlok.

Isard smirked. "There have been convoys in and out of Celanon for weeks now. He's going after Vinsoth, and then onto Muun space, to link the two northern pockets."

That earned Isard a smile and a nod from Orlok. "Well done, well done, very good deduction, for a civilian."

Before any inter-department bickering could go further, Tarkin raised his voice. "Please get to the point, Director," he said, in the coldest voice he could.

"Yes, my lord," said Orlok, bowing his head. "My *esteemed* colleague is generally correct, Grievous's next move is being staged at Axxila and will be aimed towards Muun space. We believe the key of the operation will be the Mirgoshir system, which sits at the junction of the Celanon Spur and the Brexant Run hyperlanes. Control of these hyperlanes will allow the Separatists to shift forces between Mygeeto and Celanon in a matter of hours, rather than the week-long detour through Wild Space they rely on now. As we speak, the Grand Army is engaged in its forty-ninth week of siege on Agamar, the capital of the Mirgoshir system and the whole Lahara sector. That is where Grievous will be headed."

Tarkin nodded. "But it's not that simple, is it?"

"No," Orlok said. "And this is where the civilian branch has exceeded the military."

On cue, Isard stood, while Orlok sat. "The Senate Bureau of Intelligence favors a less active form of intelligence-gathering," said Isard. "Grievous's new Carammite friends have not eliminated as many of our spies. Sources on Ciutric IV have alerted us to a growing build-up of rebel cells on the planet. They're preparing for something, despite Ciutric being off the main trade-lanes."

"There's nothing of value at Ciutric," said Mace Windu. The Jedi's arms were crossed, and skepticism was on his face. "Why would the Separatists be planning anything there?"

"The Jedi may be forgiven of this ignorance," said Isard. "They lead the clone units of the Grand Army and rarely deal with other units. Did you know, General Windu, that in the last year, the majority of our fighting forces have become not clone troopers, but regular people like you and I? Well over half the troops on Agamar now are not clones, but regional Loyalist armies. You and your troopers are the tip of the spear that is the Republic's might."

"And this has what to do with Ciutric?" asked Windu.

"Why, the situation is the same for the Separatists," said Isard. "The Agamar garrison is mainly local conscripts, with droid army units used as elite forces. And Ciutric IV was a net contributor of materiel to the Separatists. Their army was well-equipped, trained, and disciplined, like most outposts of civilization in the Outer Rim. They needed no droids. Thus, when we captured the planet, this army... disappeared."

"Why was such a thing allowed?" Tarkin asked. "What fool of a general let enemy combatants escape after a surrender? They should have been taken to a prison station."

A number of army generals shifted uncomfortably, before one spoke. "Chancellor, the timetables given by your predecessor were very strict. We were not allowed the time to finish mopping-up on Ciutric."

"If they cause trouble," an admiral spoke up, "we can always bomb them from orbit."

"If they're in the countryside, yes," Windu said. "But what if they hide with the civilian populace? Orbital bombards always have massive collateral damage. That tactic is out of the question."

"Is it?" asked Tarkin. "These people chose to rebel against the legal authority. Let them face the consequences of treason." Now the senators murmured among each other. A few nodded approvingly, others looked outraged. Ignoring them, Tarkin spoke on. "Admirals, generals, do not hesitate to make examples of traitors in the future. We are going to end this rebellion with the only language it understands: violence. Orlok, Isard, continue."

"The Ciutricene army is scattered, but it is not defeated," Isard said. "Grievous may send a fleet to the system to provoke an uprising against our garrison. In fact, I think he certainly will do such a thing."

"And this has consequences for the greater campaign," said Orlok. "Most regional militaries are useless outside of their home territory. Don't let the name *Planetary Security Forces* fool you. The Ciutric Hegemony has a history of long-ranging expeditions against pirates, slavers, and barbarians based in Wild Space; they've been more than willing to leave their homes and fight elsewhere. They are small, on a galactic scale, but an army like that could tip the battle against us on Agamar."

"Very well," Tarkin said. "How will we prevent this?"

"We'll have to eliminate the Ciutricene rebels. Immediately." Isard gave Tarkin a hard-eyed look, and Tarkin understood just what *eliminating immediately* would entail. *Let the Jedi and civilians wail,* he thought, *we have a war to win.*

"Director Orlok, are you in agreement?"

"Completely, my lord."

"Then get me Moff Wessex," said Tarkin. "The Ninth Fleet has a critical mission."

Think, Esera, think! How was a lightweight destroyer designed to fight pirates and raiders going to survive against a heavy cruiser made for total war, for two hours? The entire saga with the fighters and bombers had only taken ten minutes, *Encounter* had a long way to go.

Gun for gun, *Encounter* was a match for the *Vigilance*. The Republic cruiser's armament consisted of twenty dedicated ship-to-ship turbolasers and over fifty point-defense guns. *Encounter* had twenty-six ship-to-ship turbolasers, sixty dual-purpose laser cannons, and 60 point-defense guns. The problem was, *Vigilance* could put as much power into her guns as she put into her shields, while *Encounter* would be struggling to match that for either guns *or* shields. And even if the shields failed, *Vigilance* had her armor, everywhere.

Not everywhere, actually... Esera pulled herself from her thoughts to check on the situation. *Vigilance* was creeping up behind them, gaining kilometers by the second, and was soon to be in prime turbolaser range. For a while, this would be alright, the *Venator*-class lacked in firepower facing directly forward. They would have to point their nose down to the planet to unmask all their dorsal turrets, and that meant they'd have to stop accelerating. But because *Vigilance* accelerated faster than *Encounter,* every second increased her rate of gain, and soon they would be neck-in-neck. That would be a disaster for the flimsy Separatist destroyer.

Of course, the *Venator* shared the weaknesses of most Kuat Drive Yards products: poor fire arcs and the gaping hole in the armor called the ventral hangar. *I think that's what I'm going to have to do,* thought Esera. *Get in close, surprise them, and keep my ship out of the main battery's fire arcs.* But that was by far easier said than done. They'd have thousands of kilometers to pummel *Encounter* before she got close enough for her higher power-to-mass ratio to matter. She pitched her idea to Voyan and the droid commander, OOM-451.

"That seems like the fastest way to get blown up, Captain," Voyan said. "I think your time on those star destroyers spoiled you. Trust me, I've seen first-hand what those things do to our ships up close."

"Captain, this tactic may lead to mutual destruction," said OOM-451. "In fact, it may simply lead to our destruction."

"This is the only way we win," said Esera. Like Voyan, she buckled in her safety harness, as the droids magnetized. Esera opened up the intercom. "This is Captain Komara to anyone active. We're about to undertake some very heavy maneuvering and expect a partial loss of artificial gravity and inertial dampeners. Strap in." *Stay safe, Alize!* Esera took a deep breath, and wiped her already-sweaty palms on her pants. "Pilot, bring us about."

In *Vigilance*'s medbay, Ahsoka and Obi-wan had just finished helping the last of the wounded clone pilots get ready for treatment.

"It was like someone turned off our scanners," a clone said, a bloody bandage around his head, courtesy of a very rough landing. "We didn't even know what had happened at first, until everything started exploding. A lot of good men died out there."

"The Separatists always have a new trick," said Obi-wan.

"Komara's still Komara," Ahsoka muttered, "but she's not pulling any punches with us."

In minutes, the mood of the ship changed. The voice on the intercom grew more strained, and Obi-wan could feel a sense of anxiety growing throughout the ship. Ahsoka had the great idea of tuning into the Zeltron local holonet. There was no way they weren't reporting on the starship duel unfolding above their planet.

Obi-wan couldn't believe what he was seeing. Neither could Ahsoka.

"Is she *turning around*?" asked Ahsoka, incredulous. "A full division of those destroyers wouldn't be enough to take our cruiser on!"

Zeltron holofeeds all showed the same thing: the *Recusant* was flipping around, its three engines burning like torches among the stars, prow settling straight on *Vigilance*.

"Has she gone mad?" asked Obi-wan.

"This is the kind of move Anakin would pull," Ahsoka said. "And that... actually worries me."

"Esera Komara isn't even close to Anakin's level." Obi-wan shook his head. "Not even in the same star system. There's nothing she can do with such a weak ship."

But watching that destroyer hurtling recklessly towards them on the viewscreen, Obi-wan couldn't help but feel a sense of mild apprehension.

The Zeltrons were getting the show of their lives as the two warships closed to point-blank range mere hundreds of kilometers above their lands. Ahead, *Vigilance* attempted to unmask her full battery, dipping her nose down towards the surface. But Esera wasn't having it, she pointed *Encounter* down and tried to stay within a few degrees of the longitudinal axis of the star destroyer. The blue point-defense lasers opened up on them, *Encounter* hit back with her heavier anti-ship turbolasers. But the cruiser's shields were far too strong for Encounter to penetrate on her own, at least from the front.

Esera's plan hinged entirely on the great weakness of the *Venator*: its hangar openings. Particularly, the ventral hangar bay, which was completely open to the outside environment but for its shielding. Shields grew weaker the further they were from the projector, and the *Venator*'s ventral shielding went straight over the hangar opening; the weakest shielding over the literal hole in the ship's armor. It was a critical flaw that Esera knew the Separatists rarely exploited. Perhaps they lacked confidence in their weaker armament and delicate hulls, perhaps they were simply blasted apart before they got close enough. The Republic star destroyers loved to get close in a fight, and seldom did large fleet actions allow for the kind of maneuvering required to hit the hangar shields.

Today was different. They had descended into such a low orbit that atmospheric drag was no longer a negligible factor, and it was slowing down the cruiser more than it slowed down the sleeker destroyer with its narrow cross-section.

Encounter dived beneath *Vigilance*'s firing arc, rolling over unto her back to allow her belly-mounted turrets to open up. All the while, the angular cruiser tried to roll with her, hiding the hangar and getting her heavy turbolasers on-target. *They'll finish re-arming their bombers in a few minutes,* thought Esera. *Then we're really in trouble...* She'd need to finish this fight, fast.

For a few seconds, *Vigilance* got three of her huge turrets on *Encounter,* and the heavy blue bolts slammed into the destroyer's starboard shields. "We're down thirty percent on bow starboard shields, Captain," a droid announced.

"Direct all shield power to the side of the ship facing the enemy," Esera ordered.

"We'll be vulnerable to attack from other angles," said OOM-451.

"It's a good thing they can only attack from one angle, then!" snapped Esera. "You have your orders." *Battle droids!* she cursed silently.

"What happens when those bombers come back?" asked Voyan.

"*Vigilance* is one of the new *Venators,*" said Esera. "They don't have the big dorsal doors that run the length of the flight deck, only a small door on top. They mainly deploy ships from the ventral hangar. And that's our target."

"Our point-defenses could pick them off as they come out of the secondary exit, then," Voyan said, nodding to himself.

"Maybe," said Esera. She wasn't confident taking out the hangar would do anything to stop those turbolasers.

An idea began to take shape in Esera's mind. *It takes them longer to overcome inertia than us,* she thought. *What if we bait them into a maneuver they can't stop?* She'd have to find a sweet spot where it took them too long to alter course, without it taking too long for *Encounter* to do the same. Esera ordered OOM-451 to run the calculations on such a window of opportunity.

Again, *Vigilance* managed to spin enough to get her guns on target. This barrage was longer and heavier, and this time, the starboard shields nearly failed. *Encounter* shook and trembled under the bombardment, as the damage control display went red along the destroyer's right side. "There goes all those capacitors I installed," groaned Voyan. "Dispatching repair drones now."

"Captain, we can't take more hits like those," said OOM-451.

"Clearly," Esera said. *I understand why Grievous is always angry at these things,* she thought.

"The computer has finished the calculations you requested," the droid said.

"Plot a course that'll put us directly beneath that cruiser while they're stuck in their maneuver." Within moments, a pilot droid reported in:

"Course plotted, Captain."

But the command droid had more to say. "We're going to need to bait them into this maneuver. The damage could be severe."

"If we don't do this, there'll be nothing left of us *to* damage." Esera looked at the projected course. They'd swing around the star destroyer, starboard side exposed, and pass directly through the enemy firing arc. If the Republic captain took the bait, *Vigilance* would follow the swing, keeping *Encounter* in that arc as long as possible. After half a minute, *Vigilance* would be committed to the spin she'd put herself in, while *Encounter* would be able alter course and end up below the star destroyer, right where she needed to be. "Voyan, can you keep us in one piece long enough to do this?"

Voyan frowned, doubt filled his spirit. But he closed a fist. "I'll do everything I can, Captain."

"That's all I need," said Esera. "Engage."

Encounter's engines and maneuvering thrusters fired, the ship slid across the stars like a repulsor sled out of control. Her starboard side faced *Vigilance*'s starboard, and Esera imagined her opponent gaping in disbelief at the monumental stupidity of this move. One *Recusant* wouldn't even last a minute under a *Venator*'s full battery! But they had her file. They knew she was a seventeen year old girl, only promoted to knighthood to take another dead Jedi's place. They knew she'd been branded a Dark Jedi, likely as bloodthirsty as any of Dooku's acolytes. That Loyalist captain, kilometers away, must have been thinking this dumb, short-sighted little girl's luck had run out, and she'd finally put herself in a losing position due to her inexperience and incompetence. *Vigilance*'s starboard battery opened up in full, from heavy turbolasers to point-defense guns.

Encounter responded in kind, a hail of red laser bolts splashing uselessly against the cruiser's barely-scratched shields. The destroyer rocked and shook, the damage control display flashed warning after warning. "We've got them, Captain," said OOM-451. "They've committed to the turn!"

"Engines to full thrust, take us under," Esera ordered. "Voyan, status?"

"Starboard shields are fried," he said. "We've taken immense damage to the outer hull, but she's holding together. We're not out of the fight yet."

As the star destroyer spun, locked by the laws of physics into her maneuver, *Encounter*'s engines flared like a new star in the sky once more. She flipped, bow pointing towards the planet, drive plume pointed into the stars, and slowly dipped below the star destroyer's side. The enemy was trying to flip themselves over and keep a firing solution, but the turn they were stuck in complicated their tracking. *Encounter* flipped again, and arced upwards at the exposed underside of the cruiser.

"Drop shields, I want the entire remaining reactor output in our forward guns," Esera ordered. "Target the ventral hangar with everything we've got."

Voyan made a choking noise, but he obeyed. She could sense his thoughts: no one dropped shields on a Separatist ship and lived to tell the tale.

Now *Encounter*'s hull was fully exposed, not only to the meager point-defense guns, but to the deadly SPHA turbolaser emitter. The blue beam lanced out, piercing a hole through *Encounter*'s bow and deep into the inner hull. The sheer amount of mass shielded *Encounter*'s critical components and inhabited decks however, and she roared on. Her own red bolts blasted away at the enemy's hangar shields, which were glowing bright with energy, as the destroyer continued to accelerate towards her target. They drew nearer, *Vigilance* was finally regaining control of her maneuvering and trying to tilt away, but the hangar shields didn't fail.

"The ship's computer has calculated that we don't have sufficient energy to overload the enemy's hangar shielding," OOM-451 reported.

"That's it, then," Voyan said. "We did everything we could, and it still wasn't enough."

Not everything, thought Esera, her eyes growing wide as she remembered her *other* idea for dealing with the Tagge battlecruiser. Her heart raced, her hands trembled, but she knew there was only one course before her now.

"Captain, we must break off before we impact the enemy ship," said OOM-451. "Their beam weapon will be recharged in the next fifteen seconds."

"No," said Esera.

"Captain-!" started Voyan, but she cut him off with an order she never thought she'd ever give:

"Sound collision!"

Encounter's bridge went crimson, as the alarm began to blare.

"*All hands, brace for impact!*" shouted the intercom. "*All hands, brace for impact!*"

Obi-wan grabbed onto a support pillar while Ahsoka wedged herself into a doorway. In a moment, Komara's suicidal plan had become all too clear. It really was an Anakin move she was pulling.

They had hardly a moment for words before a dull roar filled their ears, and every bulkhead on *Vigilance* rang. Pipes burst and conduits overloaded as the ship rocked, throwing every last particle of dust into the air and nearly throwing Obi-wan to the floor, and everything went dark as the shaking and rumbling continued. As soon as it had subsided, the dim emergency lights had snapped on. The ship sat in eerie stillness. He couldn't even feel the faint vibration of the reactor in the floor panels anymore.

"She really has gone mad," Obi-wan said, coughing.

"She *rammed* us!" exclaimed Ahsoka. "Unbelievable!"

Obi-wan went to the bacta tank that held Asajj Ventress. The unconscious woman had been knocked about, but aside from a fresh bruise on her forehead, she looked fine. The unit was operating without any major problems. "We need to get in contact with the bridge," said Obi-wan. "This ship could be in very big trouble right now." The bridge evidently thought the same, because his comlink began to chirp. "Kenobi here," he said into it.

"General, this is Cody," the clone's voice came. "I know the Chancellor relieved you of duty, but as commanding officer of this ship, I am formally requesting Jedi assistance in handling recovery efforts."

"And you shall have them," Obi-wan said. "Where do you need me?"

"We've lost contact with most of the decks directly behind the hangar," said Cody. "Furthermore we're receiving reports of both fires and fuel line ruptures. The main reactor and secondary reactors are all offline, we're running on emergency batteries right now. We need to find out the extent of the damage and stop the fires from reaching any of the fuel lines."

"Understood," said Obi-wan. "I'll do what I can."

"Commander Tano's assistance would be greatly appreciated as well."

Ahsoka nodded. "I'll go look for survivors aft of the hangar," she said.

"And I'll help with the fuel lines, before this whole ship explodes," Obi-wan said. "We'll meet back here at the medbay and do what we can for the wounded."

"Got it," Ahsoka said.

Esera stared out at the durasteel armor meters from the bridge windows. *I can't believe I'm alive,* she thought. *Encounter*'s beakish prow had smashed through the hangar shields, and sliced into the ship's interior at an angle, no doubt obliterating anything directly behind and to the port side of the hangar bay. Now the two ships were wedged together, and neither was fit to fight on.

"Do we still have main power?" asked Esera.

"Yes, Captain," said a droid.

"Back us off, full reverse," she said. *Encounter* shook and groaned, her maneuvering thrusters wrenching her free of the mess of metal her prow had made. A horrific tearing noise assaulted her Esera's ears, and as soon as *Encounter* broke free of her victim, Esera saw that the destroyer was leaving behind a significant portion of her mass. The entire bow had ceased to exist as anything more than a mangled, shapeless clump of durasteel ahead of the bridge, the rest was embedded in the star destroyer. *Thank the Force that everyone is behind the bridge,* thought Esera. The SPHA-T had missed the crew quarters and medbay, too. As far as she knew, her crew was safe.

"How's the damage?" asked Esera, looking to Voyan expectantly.

"Crippling, but not catastrophic," he said. "All starships are built to resist longitudinal stress more than anything else, because that's the stress the engine thrust puts on the frame. The force from the impact was distributed in a way the ship was built to handle. While we did lose most of the bow and a lot of systems are offline... the ship's career isn't over yet. That's more than I can say for them."

They looked up at *Vigilance*. Outwardly, the ship seemed fine, but for the chunk of *Recusant* lodged in the space where its hangar had been. But the gun turrets were still, the lights in the windows were mostly gone, and those that remained flickered.

"We must have hit them *really* hard," said Voyan, unstrapping from his seat. He walked on unsteady legs to the bridge windows. "We got our hands on the schematics last year, I've studied these things. The fuel tanks are behind the hangar, aren't they?"

"Yeah," said Esera, releasing her own restraints. "Do you think we took them out?"

"It looks like it. We're not reading anything from their main reactor. Their shields are down, their weapons are out." Voyan frowned, and then stood up straighter. "As your first officer, I recommend against further action. We barely have any turbolasers working, and no shields. Neither do they, but they need a lot less power to take us down than we do them. We've only got one of me here, but there's hundreds of trained engineers on that ship. They'll be combat ready before we are."

"Agreed," Esera said. "Take us into high orbit, keep the hyperdrive spooled up until the fleet arrives."

The bridge was quiet for only a few minutes, before the doors opened and one huge Zygerrian stormed in. "Esera Komara!" Alize barked, scowling furiously. "*What* have you done to my kitchen!? There's broken plates everywhere, everything's been flipped over, and don't get me started about having me hide in my quarters as this ship shakes like a toy-"

Esera sighed. She and Voyan endured a torrent of verbal abuse from Alize, who was understandably upset, to say the least. Her rant was only interrupted when *Vigilance*'s power came back on, and the star destroyer began to limp up towards them. They watched with bated breath as the cruiser ponderously made its way up the gravity well, as its systems came on one by one.

"They must be running on one of the back-up reactors," said Esera. "Even as the ship burns inside. Look at that smoke venting from the superstructure."

"You can't fault the clones for trying..." Voyan shook his head. "If they get in range, we're finished."

"Captain," a droid said, "we have ships coming out of hyperspace."

"Friendly?" asked Esera.

"Yes. Receiving transmission."

"Put it up," said Esera.

Before them, the hologram of their least favorite droid in the universe appeared, looking more sinister than ever. "Captain Komara, we meet again," Khan the super tactical droid said. "I have come to your assistance, to finish what you could not." Esera raised a finger, and opened her mouth, but she was at a loss for words. Her wit had been exhausted on Riberre, she had nothing clever to say.

"Nice cape," Voyan remarked.

"Thank you," said Khan. He'd taken the mechanic's advice and donned a dark cape not unlike one of Grievous's, though it hid more of him. Now this droid really did look like a Sith warrior of old. "I am told I may intimidate organics more effectively, if they cannot see my whole form."

"Nothing scares us more than the unknown," said Voyan.

"Horrifying," muttered Alize, who went silent as Khan's gaze turned to her. He said nothing, but the Zygerrian had met her match. Outside, *Vigilance* had ceased her sluggish advance, and was powering up her hyperdrive. They knew the day was lost.

"There goes Kenobi," Voyan said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Never thought we'd beat the Negotiator..."

"The Negotiator is no admiral," Khan said. "Captain Komara, I suggest we begin landing troops now that the planet's orbit is ours."

"We don't have much of a choice," said Esera. "Khan, can your forces take the spaceport and palace?"

"Of course," he said.

"Only shoot if they shoot first," Esera told him. "Keep collateral damage to an absolute minimum. No heavy weapons."

"Very well." If Khan had a face, Esera knew he'd be annoyed. His new vocoder had just that much intonation to it.

The invasion of Zeltros was fast and clean. Khan's landing craft disgorged their troops who took the spaceport with no losses to either side, and then drove their tanks through Ibisa's winding streets until they reached the palace, which promptly surrendered. As far as Esera knew, it was the invasion with the least casualties of all time: zero. The Zeltrons knew resistance was beyond hopeless. All they had were an internal policing force and some ancient surface-to-space missiles, both of which were disarmed by the end of the day. Esera was starting to feel the exhaustion of being up all night, rescuing Voyan in the morning, and fighting the star destroyer in the afternoon, but she had to return to the planet one last time. Voyan was doing even worse than she was, but his painkillers kept him on his feet. With Khan, the magnaguards, and a squad of commando droids at their backs, they took a shuttle directly to the palace grounds to accept the Zeltron surrender.

In the very same hall where Esera had first made her case to the monarchs, just a few days ago, she met them once more, with an army at her back. *It wasn't supposed to end like this,* she thought. *But at least it didn't end in fire.*

"Lady Komara, welcome back," said the queen. Neither she nor her partner seemed particularly upset by what was happening. In fact, they were suspiciously at ease.

"Queen Oyane, King Taru, on the authority of General Grievous, I am annexing this star system for the Confederacy of Independent Systems." Behind her, Esera could feel Voyan's satisfaction at the use of their government's proper name. "Until the conclusion of hostilities, you will be under the command of a military governor overseeing the traffic in this star system and maintaining a blockade against Republic shipping. You may send a representative to the congress on Raxus Secundus if you so wish. Upon the conclusion of hostilities with Coruscant, the occupation will end and you will be free to determine your future from then on. Is that clear?"

"Explicitly clear," said King Taru. "I trust further details are in that treaty?" He gestured to the datapad Esera held.

"Yes. You will sign it."

The monarchs had no choice, but they didn't fuss over it. They signed the treaty, and Esera had made her occupation of this planet legal. In reality, the treaty was a copy of a document her master had given to a conquered Separatist planet a year and a half ago. Esera thought it a very fair treaty and had simply replaced all the necessary words, along with adding the clause that Zeltros was to be released at the end of the war. Whenever that came.

Once Zeltros's civil and military authorities had reviewed the treaty, Khan had his droids raise the Confederate banner above the palace. For the moment, Khan himself would be the military governor. He would be immune to any Zeltron tricks, to say the least. Before she returned to orbit, the monarchs wanted one last word with her.

"Lady Komara, a minute, if you would?" asked the king, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Yes?" answered Esera. What could he possibly have been smiling about?

"We'd like to thank you," the queen said. "You played your part exactly as we expected."

Esera stared at her for a moment. "Huh?"

"We were caught in an impossible position, between Grievous and Tarkin," the king said. "By invading Zeltros and forcing this treaty on us, we are now under your protection from Grievous and have a valid reason for no longer aiding Tarkin's Republic. This was the best possible outcome, and it all relied on you."

"Hold on, you *wanted* me to invade?"

"When your lieutenant spoke up the other day, we could feel your resolve hardening," the queen said. "You're a woman who listens to her subordinates, and a woman like that would not leave one behind, we thought. So, I had the security forces disregard his kidnapping. It was our calculation you would escalate from there. And you did."

"So, you have our thanks, Lady Komara," said the king, giving her a slight bow. "You have saved our world much trouble in the future, we hope."

The monarchs departed, leaving Esera both stupefied and fuming. Every swear word she knew rattled around in her mind.

"You seem upset, Captain," said Voyan.

"Upset? Of course I am! I just got played like a- like a- I'm so mad I can't even think of anything!"

Voyan put a hand on his chin. "If you and I had a lasersword fight, right here, right now, would it be silly of me to be upset if I lost?"

"What? That's-" Esera took a breath, and calmed herself. "I've trained over a decade with a lightsaber, you've never even held one. Of course it'd be silly."

"Then why are you upset a life-long politician over thrice your age just outwitted you?" asked Voyan. The anger and fury in her heart blew out like a candle. Esera was left silent, neither possessing nor needing the words to answer. Queen Oyane had been scheming before Esera's parents had even been born, most likely. *I'm young, and have a lot to learn,* she thought. *This could have ended so much worse.*

For the past twelve hours, Grievous had done nothing but set up spreadsheets for his upcoming offensive. *If only I'd had these back on Kalee,* he thought, plotting out a month's worth of supply convoys. Using computer assistance made logistics child's play. But the logistics were nothing compared to having to organize fleets and armies for an offensive. A thousand different governments and entities had contributed to the Separatist war machine, all assuming that somehow a cohesive force would magically emerge from the chaos. It had been up to Grievous to perform that magic for three and a half years, and it was still up to him now. Sometimes, he thought it was a miracle they hadn't lost the war in the first month, with such a ramshackle military.

An incoming call interrupted his thoughts. *Aclinde?* The miniature hologram of the Carammite spy popped up on his desk. "What?" asked Grievous.

"Interesting news from Paarin Minor, General," said Aclinde. "Moff Wessex's fleet is breaking orbit as I speak."

Grievous put names and locations together. Paarin Minor was barely an hour away from Agamar by the fastest hyperlane, and only half a day from Ciutric. He let out a growl. "They're onto us already!?"

"So it would seem, General," Aclinde said, shrugging. "You'd better move fast, these orders apparently came directly from Coruscant."

He didn't bother with formalities. Grievous shut off the transmission, and brought up *Invisible Hand*'s captain. "Dofine!" Grievous barked into his communicator.

"General?" asked the sleepy Nemoidian. It was the middle of the night shift, for organics.

"We have a problem! I want us underway to Ciutric within the hour!"

"Yes, sir," said Dofine. "Just us?"

"The entire fleet, you dolt!" Grievous roared. He rushed out of his tower, and to the bridge. *Where did they get the fuel for this?* he wondered. *Have they recovered already? Or did I not hit their depots in this region hard enough?* Whatever the answer was, it'd have to wait. The Republic had just moved up the schedule for his next offensive by a week.

Author's notes: At last, the end of the Zeltros arc. Rejoice, ye who didn't enjoy my very low-key Miami Vice and Scarface tribute. Though that part really ended last chapter.

First off, apparently Ysanne Isard's father seen here was director of the SBI *and* Republic Intelligence during the war, a fact I was unaware of when I introduced Orlok way back when. Well, that's stupid so I'm glad I didn't go with it. Branch rivalries are much more spicy. I also made the extrapolation that the Ciutricene military is not a mere planetary defense force based on the information that their military was turned into the Axxila anti-pirate fleet by the Empire. Surely, a formerly-Separatist military would not be so eagerly inducted into the Empire unless it had something uncommon to offer? Such as experience in taking the fights to pirates and other trouble-makers of the frontier.

Second off, I am proud to announce a return to our regular programming of putting the wars back in "Clone wars." Take that, Filoni, you wolfaboo. Can't believe they wasted four season 7 episodes on mop-haired inept smugglers instead of actual Clone Wars material. Will the feels and character drama return to ASD? Of course! I hear the groaning and complaints of filler already.

Third off, to the anonymous reviewer who remarked on my update intervals, this did not take months to get out, it took slightly over *one* month! Shout-out to my beta reader Corshy by the way, both for error-checking and telling me where I need to add things that are obvious to me but not others.

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